CITY/REGION

Clergy forms group to promote respect for differences, beliefs

Tolerance urged at national religious symposium

By **Pam Zubeck**
Gazette Telegraph

A tiny group of Colorado Springs clergy has formed the Pikes Peak Interfaith Council, saying it wants to foster a greater understanding and respect for various religious beliefs.

Founders announced the group Saturday during a national religious leaders' symposium held at the First Baptist Church, 317 E. Kiowa St., under the auspices of the "America the Beautiful" centennial celebration.

The symposium, a study in tolerance, featured 11 speakers from wide-ranging theologies whose remarks pivoted around the philosophies espoused by Katharine Lee Bates' inspiring words and life.

Among the speakers were a lesbian Unitarian reverend from Boston, a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints representative from Salt Lake City, an Eckankarist from Denver, a Catholic priest, a Baptist clergyman and a Jewish ethicist.

Ellene Shapiro, a spokesman for the local Jewish Voices for Justice, said the council grew from calls to the Denver regional office of the National Conference for Christians and Jews expressing dismay at the lack of tolerance for religious diversity.

Its goal is to combat racism, bigotry and intolerance in Colorado Springs by opening channels of communication through the clergy and, ultimately, instilling a greater magnanimity for various cultures, beliefs and faiths, founders said.

"We live in a richly pluralistic society, with a caveat of history that tells us that absolutism under any guise is tyranny," said Shapiro, whose Jewish group formed in January as a political arm of the Jewish community.

The council is being launched by representatives of the Unitarian Church, Congregational Church, United Church of Christ and the Jewish community, Shapiro said. Its first meeting will be at noon Aug. 11 at the First Christian Church, Cascade and Platte avenues.

"The goal is not to attain agreement, but to attain relationships," Pastor Harvey Joiner of All Souls Unitarian Church said.

The symposium's speakers warned that Americans must overcome differences or face a bleak future.

The Rev. Paul H. Sherry warned of "thunder on the horizon" saying, "Men and women who love mercy more than life — that, my friends, is the way to our future."

The Cleveland United Church of Christ pastor also said: "We must become a church not only for some but all, and embrace the rich diversity of God's creation. It's time we mended the flaw of exclusion, racism and homophobia, religious intolerance, child neglect and abuse, and the arrogance of unrestrained power."

Margot Adler, a pagan priestess and National Public Radio journalist, theorized that a fear of diversity stems from all Americans' having come from cultures of oppression.

"Maybe there isn't one answer. Maybe it's better to have a multiplicity of views. Maybe we all don't have to get to one state of mind. And maybe one government isn't the best thing. And maybe we can find a way to live in harmony with our differences," she said.

Michael Allen, a former Denver University professor now running an ethics consulting business in Denver, lashed out at "Christian fundamentalists," saying they endanger his religious freedom by trying to dismantle constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

"If you who live in Colorado Springs want to achieve the kind of religious tolerance that has inspired you to convene this very program, then that tolerance has to begin with a strong message of intolerance for the views and actions of those . . . whose moral and religious intolerance have infected this community and this state," said Allen, who is Jewish.

Later, Allen was mildly rebuked by an audience member.

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